

The Good News of Vulnerability

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.
2 Corinthians 12:9

I recently had a sobering walk with my father. My brother Kevin pulled up the car to shorten the distance between start and finish. Needing my help, Dad gripped my right hand while my brother-in-law, Greg, took hold of his left. My nephew Michael was ready to brace him from behind should he stumble. Coaching him along, my mom led from the front where he could see the most familiar face. Utterly dependent, this man—who used to love to outspurt me in playful foot races—now took over a half hour to travel a mere six yards.

As I write, I am slowly losing my father to Alzheimer's Disease, a progressive form of dementia that compromises the brain's patchwork of cells needed to retain information and perform other cognitive functions. The long march downward likely began a decade ago, but this past year has seen the greatest decline. Painful reality has arrived: Dad's needs have finally surpassed what my mother's unquestionably heroic caregiving can handle.

Seeing my dad in so helpless a state has led me to ponder more youthful days. I remember the Marlboro-smoking man who exhorted us to "take the bull by the horns" the way he did. Indeed, upon completing service in the Korean War, he worked his way through one of the nation's most prestigious art schools, becoming a gifted and industrious designer. He fashioned the interior spaces of countless buildings, ranging from big department stores to high-rise corporate offices and even nuclear power plants. Beyond aesthetics, however, my dad's

craft was about optimizing physical environments for human collaboration, creating the spaces where people worked interdependently to solve problems and pursue shared goals.

For my '50s-generation, "self-made" father, the unnerving reality of human dependence—and interdependence—has become graciously inescapable. In caring for my dad, I've become more keenly aware of my own vulnerability, seeing in his physical frail-



ty what will one day be mine. My siblings and I feel vulnerable in other ways as well. How do we care for Dad? Are we making the right decisions? Do we have all the right information? How is Mom doing, and are we doing what's best for her? Are we putting our relationships at risk? What are the long-term implications?

But, with such vulnerability comes grace. It has come from all sides. The rallying together of my siblings. The senior-care specialists who helped us navigate the landscape of institutional support. The nurses, physicians, social workers, janitors, and food service providers during his hospitalization. The in-home providers, physical therapists, ambulance drivers, and medical equipment suppliers. The restaurant manager who came to my dad's aid. The police officers who joined the search when he wandered astray. My fellow congregation members who watched my kids so that I could watch my dad.

The prayer group that prayed for my family regularly. The fellow parishioner who took time to get my mom out of the house for conversation, laughter, and perspective. The wisdom of the saints who've already walked the road of caring for aging loved ones.

In this season, I have come to more deeply appreciate the gift of each other. We learn this best, I'm coming to realize, in those places of weakness and vulnerability. We see how fundamentally interconnected we are, not only as blood relatives and church family but also as members of the larger body of humanity. We see how God provides through people we've never even met before, people from whom we might otherwise distance ourselves. Our sense of self-sufficiency and autonomy is humbled. We were designed to be interdependent. On our own, we are all vulnerable, whether or not we care to admit it.

To be reconnected to "the other" in our weakness is another way of understanding the good news of the cross. Jesus Christ, his own body broken for us, graciously exposes our brokenness so that we might be drawn back into relationship with him and to one another. This good news, of course, flies in the face of a culture that venerates personal freedom and despises weakness. It offends an economic system that rewards the fittest, that ultimately assumes that "each man for himself" is morally acceptable. Let us therefore embrace our weakness, that our world might know its need for God's perfect, powerful, and all-sufficient grace.



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